

BIRD MIGRATION AND FOWLING IN AFGHANISTAN

BY

S. A. AKHTAR

Professor of Biology, Faculty of Science, Kabul

(With a map)

It is a well known fact that in the northern hemisphere, birds have their breeding quarters in the northern parts and winter quarters near the Equator. Absence of an adequate food supply in winter is by itself enough to account for emigration; and return from the south in spring is probably due to the desire of birds to re-occupy their old homes in which they have been bred. By means of migration they avoid the rigours of the northern winter while they are able to enjoy the long hours of the northern summer when rearing their young. There can be little doubt that during migratory movements visual clues play an important if not exclusive part; and the majority of birds adopt routes along the river courses where they are provided with food as well as drink. [?Ebs.]

It is not intended here to discuss the birds as a whole, but to examine the conditions of those species which have their summer quarters north of the Himalayas and their winter quarters south of that range. It is quite possible that the bulk of the migratory birds from Siberia, after spending winter in India pass round the Himalayas either east or west. No great migratory movements have been observed via any of the big Himalayan valleys between Kashmir and Sikkim. The Himalayan extension towards south from Kashmir to Quetta appears to offer no obstacle except the Sulaiman Range, if that is of any importance, but nowhere have the migrants been observed so plentifully as at the lower end of the Kurram Valley. Here in the months of February and March are found vast quantities of wildfowl, waders, gulls etc. on passage to their far-off northern homes from the lower reaches of the Indus and the Manchar Lake in Sind. Whitehead remarks: 'The majority of these birds undoubtedly keep to the river-route, there being no other important water-way lying near that line of migration, and must therefore of necessity pass up the Kurram Valley.'

The migrants from Sind etc. thus enter Afghanistan through the Kurram Valley which leads them to the upper basin of the Kabul River in which it flows with its tributaries, the Logar, the Ghorband and the Punjshair. It is relatively flat country and, beginning from the Logar Valley, it stretches northwards through the Kabul Valley and the Kohdaman Valley up to the Kohistan Valley. But it is bounded on the north by the lofty range of the Hindukush, which forms a natural barrier the migrants have to meet in crossing Afghanistan. It is a western offshoot of the Himalayas, stretching westwards from Pamir to Bamian where it breaks up into several almost parallel branches. It rises far in the region of perpetual snow but has certain points along it less high, forming many passes of which one, the Perwan Pass (at present known as the Salung

Pass), has a great importance in connection with the migration of birds.

The head of the Salung Pass is the source of two opposite flowing rivers, the Khinjan and the Perwan (at present known as the Jubbal-us-siraj River). The former, flowing down its northern slope, joins its tributary the Andrab, and a little farther the Ballola or Bamian River, and then becomes the Kunduz River which flows further northwards into the Oxus. Thus it forms to some extent a flight line, as it may be called, beyond the Hindukush. The Jubbal-us-siraj flowing down the southern slope joins its tributary the Ghorband River, and a little farther the Punj-shair River. Farther beyond the Kobistan Valley it joins the Kabul River which afterwards flows eastwards into the Indus. Thus an almost continuous waterway is present over the Hindukush at the Salung Pass. This pass provides the shortest route into Afghan Turkestan and lies just in front of and along the flight line from the head of the Kurram Valley and along the Logar River. Sultan Baber remarks: ' (The Perwan Pass) . . . is the grand pass up the Hindukush, and there is no other pass but itself in this vicinity. On that account all the game ascends the mountain by this route'. Incidentally it is interesting to note that the remarks of Whitehead regarding the Kurram Valley are almost identical with those of Sultan Baber regarding the Salung Valley made about five hundred years earlier.

Just as the birds, during their northward journey before ascending the Kurram Pass, make a halt on their way at Bannu in the open, similarly before ascending the Salung Pass they make a halt at Bagram, and every one who has visited the place at the appropriate time has been struck by the great abundance of birds there. It is quite possible that birds coming up from the southeast along the Kabul River, and those coming up through the Gomal Pass, may be further added to the number arrived from the south through the Kurram Pass. Thus large flocks of duck, teal, lapwings, herons, pelicans, etc., come and make a halt at Bagram. Alexander Burns made 'a collection of no less than forty-five different species of ducks, and it was quite evident,' he says, 'that many additions might have been made'. Tamerlane on his way to India, finding immense numbers of birds, took back with him fowlers from Multan on his return journey. They were installed in about two or three hundred houses and were called slave-fowlers. There is still a village near Bagram which is known as Syyaḍan (= fowlers,) and mostly inhabited by them.

Leaving Bagram aside let us look over the whole of the upper basin of the Kabul River. In addition to rivers there are places here and there where in early spring snow-water accumulates forming large shallow lakes. There are two or three such lakes or marshes about Kabul City which are the resort of immense numbers of aquatic birds. It is for this reason that the inhabitants, from ancient times, are fond of game and skilful in fowling. Formerly they used to catch big birds by means of springs. A long cord was wound on a stick with a cross handle of horn at one end and a double-pointed arrow at the other. At night when the birds fly low, the stick was taken out and the cordage was thrown over the bird. The cord winding over the neck, wing or leg used to bring the bird down.¹ The practice does not seem to exist today.

¹ This description is somewhat obscure. Presumably some form of bolas—Eds.

At some places on the Hindukush there are, however, some detached oval ponds specially constructed for catching wild geese and ducks. The plan adopted, though crude, is unique in its way. By the aid of narrow dug trenches or channels, water from the running stream is let into the ponds and turned off when full. The pond is surrounded by a stone wall high enough to allow a man to crouch behind unobserved. Over and across one-half or less of this pond a rough trellis-work of thin willow branches is put up. The birds on alighting are gradually driven under this canopy and a sudden rush is made by those on the watch. In this manner hundreds of birds are caught daily during the season.

In the valleys of Kohdaman and Kohistan another method is adopted for catching ducks. A small hut, covered with reeds etc. is built over a water channel leading off from the main river or the lake on which the birds gather. At night when the ducks are floating about in sleep, the fowler enters the hut and, opening a sluice-gate that divides off the water of the river or lake, strikes a light inside and awaits the ducks. They drift in on the current one by one through the narrow opening and are at once seized by the neck and made *halal*—killed according to Islamic law. In this manner a couple of men can easily secure from a hundred and fifty to two hundred ducks in a single night.

Coots are resident and common in the country. They are caught by means of nets stretched across the channels in the reed-beds. These nets are hung on sticks fixed in the mud, the lower edge being in the water, the upper edge above the surface. The flocks are driven into the nets with the aid of rafts.

With the introduction of fire-arms bird-shooting has become a favourite sport and great havoc is done annually. The rivers and lakes are fringed with shooting boxes—little loop-holed mud-huts built on the edge of the water. Near them are placed many decoy-ducks, dead ones whose bodies are stuffed and attached to sticks fixed in the water. Sometimes they are anchored in their proper position by stones tied to their feet with pieces of cord that reach the bottom. The decoy-ducks which are locally called *maulay*, are so skilfully arranged on the sides of the water that once Alexander Burns, seeing plenty of ducks in the river at Bagram, fired at them, when to his great surprise he found they were but decoys! Often they are arranged in a straight line along the edge of a river or a lake. At night when the fowler finds a bird on either side out of the line he fires at it. The decoy ducks are meant to deceive their fellow birds and they often serve their purpose admirably.

Sometimes another method is employed to counteract the shyness of the birds. Two men with shot-guns creep behind a bullock driven towards the fowls, and when within range fire leisurely over the animal's back at them.

Early in the spring, when the trees are still devoid of leaves, the inhabitants of Kohdaman or Kohistan fix *maulays* to the branches of mulberry trees. These are not stuffed birds but are simply pieces of half-burnt wood. Birds like the starling etc. taking them for their fellow birds descend on the trees where they are easily shot from cover.

Not only are aquatic birds in abundance but other birds like larks, pipits, wagtails etc. are also plentiful during the spring season, hence several kinds of raptorial birds are trapped and trained for falconry. The principal kinds are *Baz* (? Goshawk, *Accipiter gentilis*) *Charagh* or *Charagh* falcon (*Falco cherrug*) and *Shahin* or Peregrine falcon

(*F. peregrinus*) etc. Of these the Baz is the most esteemed and is taught to soar over the falconer's head and strike the quarry as it rises in the air.

Large flocks of Wrynecks, Bluethroats and Pastors arrive in April and May. Vigne has noticed large flocks of Rosy Pastor entering Afghanistan by the Gomal Pass on 27th April. These birds were knocked over by pellet-bows. The bows were made of bamboo and the round pellets were of clay baked in the sun, but now the pellet-bow is nowhere to be seen in the country.

Sparrows are knocked over by means of *poofak* or blow-pipe which is a bored wooden stick about a yard long, its hole not being more than half a centimetre in diameter. A small pill of moist clay is put in at one end and from the other it is blown forcibly by mouth at the bird nearby. But catapults are common and boys are generally seen wandering about with them. They are charged with small gravel to which small birds fall easy victims.

As soon as the quails are 'in', every boy and man turns out with a long thin willow-rod at one end of which there is a horse-hair noose. When a quail is seen crouching under a stone the noose is slowly slipped over its neck and jerked up. Sometimes horse-hair nooses are fastened to lumps of clay which are then scattered around the borders of the fields where the birds are accustomed to run about.

Sparrows, quails and other small birds are caught in large numbers by means of nets thrown over standing corn. Sparrows are said to be caught in such immense numbers in Kohistan that even a widow having nobody to take care of her gets enough birds for one meal at least once a season! The feathers are plucked and the birds are minced flesh and bone together. The dish is greatly relished by the people, and thought to be a kind of tonic, especially for the male sex. All birds that are not consumed locally are brought down to Kabul and sold by the basketful in the markets, as are also all other kinds of birds.¹ In early spring villagers are seen in the early morning coming towards the town with duck, teal, coots etc. hanging by their legs from both hands. Teal are, perhaps, the earliest to arrive as they are seen in the beginning of February when there is no other bird available. If the previous night has been cloudy or rainy the game is more plentiful in the markets. On such days especially, storks, cranes, herons, spoonbills etc. in singles, and snipe, duck, avocets, stilts, coots, teal, grebes and other species in fives, tens or twenties, are seen hanging up for sale in poulterer's shops. From all of which it is evident that passage migrants have to pay a heavy toll in crossing over this country.

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¹ In a letter Dr. Akhtar informs us that not only sparrows, but *all* small birds that fly in flocks, irrespective of species, are netted and sold in bulk in this manner, particularly starlings (Rosy ?) and wagtails of several species. On an ornithological trip to N. Afghanistan in 1937 (with Col. R. Meinertzhagen) Mr. Sâlim Ali observed heaping basketfuls of Short-toed Larks (*Calandrella acutirostris*)—with their throats neatly cut in the approved Islamic way—hawked about for sale in the weekly bazaars.—EDS.

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